

On Forms and Functions:  
Studies in Ancient Egyptian Grammar

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# Forms and Functions in Ancient Egyptian

## A short introduction

Eitan Grossman & Stéphane Polis

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This volume comprises ten studies on the grammar of Ancient Egyptian. Some of these studies are based on papers presented at a workshop on *New Directions in Egyptian Syntax* (12-14 May, 2011, Liège), organized by the editors of this volume and supported by the Ramses Project and the University of Liège.<sup>1</sup> Not all participants ended up contributing an article, and some of the papers published here differ significantly from those presented at the workshop.

While the workshop itself was intended to discuss approaches to syntactic analysis and to present explicit frameworks, it turned out that few of the participants were much interested in synchronic syntactic analysis divorced from other linguistic phenomena. While the contributions deal with several central topics in syntactic analyses — like coordination, raising, gradience or non-expression of participants — they mostly investigate the relationship between syntax *stricto sensu* and other fields, from morphology to pragmatics (with a special attention to construction types and grammaticalization processes), with a striking common concern, which is to map the relationship between form and function in Ancient Egyptian grammar. Thus, the papers go beyond the descriptive ‘how?’ question and address numerous stimulating ‘why?’ questions.

From a thematic point of view, syntax is envisioned in most contributions in relation to other levels of linguistic analysis.

First, syntactic phenomena are often viewed as part of a broader domain of morpho-syntax, e.g., ORÉAL’s study of participles in Old Egyptian, WERNING’s paper on biclausal constructions in Earlier Egyptian, or GROSSMAN, LESCUYER & POLIS’ contribution on the Later Egyptian allative future. This is probably due, at least in part, to the lack of a language-specific definition of what it means to be a ‘morphological word’ in Ancient Egyptian, which would support a clear distinction between morphology and syntax (see, e.g., Haspelmath 2011 for a recent statement of this problem and its consequences). It also probably has to do with the fact that particular grammatical

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1 The participants in the workshop included James Allen (Providence), John van der Auwera (Antwerpen), Mark Collier (Liverpool), Todd Gillen (Liège), Eitan Grossman (Jerusalem), Ya’ar Hever (Berlin), Matthias Müller (Basel), Elsa Oréal (Paris), Stéphane Polis (Liège), Serge Rosmorduc (Paris), Wolfgang Schenkel (Tübingen), Andréas Stauder (Chicago/Basel), Julie Stauder-Porchet (Chicago/Basel), Sami Uljas (Basel/Uppsala), Pascal Vernus (Paris), Daniel Werning (Berlin), and Jean Winand (Liège).

constructions are often defined by the morphosyntactic paradigms that participate in them.

Second, a number of papers take a broadly constructional approach (see especially WERNING for an explicit statement), which entails the study of the semantic and/or pragmatic *meaning* of syntactic constructions, in recognition of the fact, expressed clearly by Givón (2001: 13), that the functional scope of clause-level grammar is predominantly about relationships between propositional meanings and wider discourse context. This is especially apparent in the contributions by ULJAS and VERNUS, which deal with the ways in which referring expressions are interpreted, and by COLLIER and GROSSMAN, LESCUYER & POLIS, which both frame their discussions of grammatical constructions in terms of pragmatics.

In terms of temporal boundaries, the studies cover the whole Ancient Egyptian corpus, i.e., Earlier Egyptian, including Old Egyptian (ORÉAL) and Middle Egyptian (ULJAS), and classical or ‘traditional’ Egyptian (GILLEN; WERNING), as well as Later Egyptian, including Late Egyptian (COLLIER; WINAND), Demotic, and Coptic (GROSSMAN, LESCUYER & POLIS; MÜLLER). Furthermore, some studies take into account the whole corpus of pre-Demotic texts (VERNUS) or deal with diachronic phenomena that cross the boundaries between Earlier and Later Egyptian (POLIS & STAUDER).

### Outline of the contributions

Based on a analysis of numerous examples, COLLIER argues that a particular type of Late Egyptian interrogative construction (namely the questions introduced by *ist* or *is*) has a particular pragmatic function: the proposition directly under question (P) is presented by the speaker as the closed option for elimination, being contrary to the speaker’s expectations, and a polar inverse inference option is invited (I) for the hearer to access the speaker’s intended point of view.





In his contribution, GILLEN proposes a comprehensive discussion of the notion of ‘register’ and uses it in order to discuss different types of form-function pairings in the historical inscriptions of Ramses III at Medinet Habu. After a synchronic characterization of the registers encountered in these inscriptions, Gillen shows that the heterogeneity of ‘Traditional Egyptian’ from the Ramesside period (i.e. *égyptien de tradition*) can be explained when taking into account the evolution of the different registers that end up coexisting within a single text as well as the history of phraseological traditions. As such, cases of formal identity (one form–many functions, e.g., the polyfunctional ‘cool’ *sdm=f* or the negation *bw sdm=f*) and of functional identity (many forms–one function, e.g., *n sdm.n=f*, *bw sdm.n=f* and *bw sdm=f* as negations of the imperfective), should be explored based on the diachrony of textual/discourse functions, rather than on purely linguistic grounds.

GROSSMAN, LESCUYER & POLIS discuss the emergence and grammaticalization of a future construction known as the ‘First Future’ in the Egyptological literature. Based on the study of a large corpus of examples of this ‘Later Egyptian Allative Future’ from Late Egyptian, through Demotic, and up to Coptic, they argue that the semantic

change that lexical items and grammatical constructions undergo in grammaticalization are best explained by pragmatic mechanisms; more specifically, they argue for the spread and semanticization of speaker-oriented inferences. The authors propose that notions like bridging context and presupposition accommodation are useful for tracing the changes in selectional restrictions on constructions, which in turn serve as a diagnostic for semantic change: in short, due to the spread and entrenchment of inferences, new types of subjects (e.g., inanimate subjects) and predicates can appear and innovative meanings associated with future time reference (in this case, PREDICTION) are increasingly semanticized, giving rise to a fully-fledged future tense. In the conclusion, this ‘Later Egyptian Allative Future’ is briefly discussed as being one part of an ‘allative future cycle’ in Ancient Egyptian.

MÜLLER first presents the numerous means for expressing necessity in Coptic (First and Third Futures, constructions with *čpi* ‘must’, *-r-k<sup>h</sup>reia* ‘have necessity’, *šš e-* ‘it is necessary to’, *t-anagkê (te)* or *ou-anagkaion pe e-* ‘it is necessary that’), and discusses their dialectal distribution in Coptic. He then describes the functions of a family of modal expressions built with *haps*, which is likely to be etymologically related to the word *hp* ‘law’. Paying careful attention to the syntax of the constructions, especially the presence vs. absence of a subject clitic, the author argues for a Coptic-internal pathway of development, taking into account, however, the inherent difficulty of making diachronic claims based on the manuscript evidence.

Challenging previous accounts, ORÉAL argues that formal differences between Old Egyptian participle forms signal consistent semantic and syntactic differences. Specifically, the author argues that graphemic endings (<ø>, <j> or <w>) and gemination provide evidence for an analysis of Old Egyptian participles as showing nominal morphology. In terms of graphemic endings, she distinguishes between ‘property encoding’ (with <ø>) and ‘class membership encoding’ (marked by <w>) for the active participles. For the passive voice, ORÉAL suggests a distinction between the stative-resultative (marked by <j>) and the class membership encoding with passive orientation (with <w>). She further proposes an explanation for the syntactic distribution of the two forms (e.g., examining their uses in depictive phrases and secondary predications), which takes into account both morphological and semantic criteria. Regarding the gemination in the participles of verb roots with weak final radical, Oréal argues that it originates in definiteness marking and discusses definiteness in relation to property encoding and TAM readings. In a final section, the author sketches the implications of her iconoclastic proposal in the broader framework of the analysis of Earlier Egyptian morphology.

POLIS & STAUDER focus on constructions in which *ib*, written  or , expresses modal meanings such as “to think, to surmise” (i.e., epistemic modality) and “to wish, to want” (i.e., agent-oriented volitional modality). They suggest that a clear-cut distinction can be made between a verb *ib* written  (or the like) expressing an epistemic judgment, on the one hand, and a non-verbal predicative construction (built with  “heart”) meaning “to want,” on the other. The authors further argue that the volitional construction (*ib=f r sdm*) sometimes displays features of syntactic gradience, reflected by the occurrence of the passive marker *-tw* (*ib=tw r*

*sdm*), which is otherwise not attested in non-verbal constructions. The argument is basically that the quasi-verbal semantics of the construction (‘volitive agent-oriented modality’) allows for the appearance of this passive marker in a semantically subject-like slot. Here, semantics wins over syntax. The last section of their paper is devoted to the discussion of examples in which *ib=f* might actually have been used in an alternative construal as a verb, exemplifying the flexibility of grammatical categories.

ULJAS’ paper deals with both the syntax and semantics of a seriously understudied topic in Egyptian syntax, namely, control constructions. Having discussed the various types of control constructions attested cross-linguistically (adjunct control and complement control, plus its subtypes), he provides a thorough survey and typology of these constructions in Earlier Egyptian. In a nutshell, ULJAS argues for a semantic-pragmatic account: in these constructions, where the reference of the subject expression of a subordinate clause is determined by some matrix clause expression, the choice of the controller and the licensing of control in general are based on semantic factors. The author claims therefore that it illustrates yet again how syntactic construal is determined by semantics.

VERNUS’ paper is occupied with the nature and function of non-overt or zero-marked clause participants. The corpus investigated is extremely large — since it includes all pre-Demotic material — but the scope of the contribution is restricted to the cases in which no first immediate participant is overtly expressed (‘ $\emptyset$ -subject’). This phenomenon is attested in numerous syntactic environments: adjectival predications; adverbial predications, including some of the verbal forms built on this pattern; theme + subject verbal forms; and clauses with predicates of non-existence. Vernus shows that the  $\emptyset$ -subject can have different types of reference, including cataphoric reference, lexical or notional anaphoric reference, contextual reference, or even have non-referential status). He further discusses interesting examples that point to the evolution from pure absence in the subject slot towards some phonetic materiality (marked by  $\text{|||}$  or  $\text{\\}$ ), endings from which arises, as argued by Edel, the innovative third person plural suffix pronoun =*w*.

WERNING analyzes a set of biclausal constructions in Earlier Egyptian — namely the so-called ‘First’ and ‘Second Scheme’ of the ‘Emphatic construction’ (Vernus 1981) — explicitly arguing that, while built on identical verbal forms, they are distinct constructions with distinct syntactic structures and distinct functions. His point of departure is the ‘Second Scheme’ construction. The author argues that a detached, uninflected relative form (URF) is here used as converb (i.e., a circumstantial clause); the event referred to by the URF provides *background* information and its temporal point of reference is the event of the main sentence (*relative tense*) — “when such and such, something happens”. The ‘First Scheme’, on the other hand, is described as a construction *focusing* on a circumstantial adjunct, the temporal point of reference for the URF being a *global* (and crucially not a relative) one. It should be stressed that this paper is the only one in the volume to explicitly cast its analysis in terms of a form of Construction Grammar (CxG).



WINAND provides a detailed study of the formal marking of coordinated noun phrases in subject function in Late Egyptian. The main issue discussed in this paper is the use of two means for subject NP-coordination in Late Egyptian, namely the comitative prepositions *hn<sup>c</sup>* and *irm* “with”. Based on a comprehensive collection of examples harvested from the Ramses database, the author analyzes the coordination of subjects in different syntactic patterns (subjects–verb vs. verb–subjects) and identifies syntactic factors leading to a conjunctive rather than to a comitative reading of both prepositions. He further argues that syntax alone does not fully explain the meaning of these prepositions in context: other parameters must be taken into considerations, such as the status of coordinands, the scope of negation, anaphoric or thematic continuity, phrasaeology, etc. In a final section, the diachronic relationship between the two comitative prepositions *hn<sup>c</sup>* and *irm* is discussed and WINAND shows that, when both prepositions are used in one text, *hn<sup>c</sup>* is clearly on the “and” (coordinating) side while *irm* is on the “with” (comitative) side.

This volume includes new analyses of problems that have long occupied linguists working on Ancient Egyptian, such as the morphosyntax of participles and other verbal forms (ORÉAL; WERNING), the nature and function of zero marking (VERNUS), and the interaction between linguistic constructions and sociocultural parameters (GILLEN). On the other hand, some topics have barely been broached in the study of Ancient Egyptian, e.g., control phenomena (ULJAS) or NP coordination (WINAND). Similarly, one notes an increased interest in the study of modality in Ancient Egyptian (POLIS & STAUDER), especially the later stages (COLLIER; GROSSMAN, LESCUYER & POLIS; MÜLLER). Also notable are some significant absences. For example, there are few discussions of the syntax of negation or non-verbal predication, all of which have been prominent topics in recent decades. Interestingly, these topics will be the focus of a number of forthcoming publications (e.g., Loprieno, Müller & Uljas *fc*, Oréal & Winand *fc*).

Finally, we would like to note a recurring issue in such collections, namely, the presentation of Ancient Egyptian data for a broader audience. Almost all of the papers here have transliterated and glossed examples in accordance with standard linguistic practices, following the Leipzig Glossing Rules, and to varying extents, the guidelines for presenting Ancient Egyptian examples proposed by Di Biase, Kammerzell & Werning (2009). We are convinced that this should be standard practice for linguists working on Egyptian, for several reasons. First, it allows non-specialists to profit from the insights and data of linguists working on Ancient Egyptian, but no less importantly, is that it encourages specialists of Ancient Egyptian to reflect carefully on their analyses and terminology. In a similar vein, the authors of the contributions to this volume have been encouraged to explain the terms of analysis characteristic of our descriptive tradition (e.g., ‘First Present’ or ‘Stative’), and to use straightforwardly accessible terminology where possible.

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